

LIBYA DESCENT INTO CHAOS - THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper gives an appraisal on how post 2011 revolution Libya has descended into chaos. An overview of political impasse, shrinking economy and various armed groups and terrorist groups responsible for the existing mayhem has been given. Based on the obtaining environment and various indicators like Global Terrorism Index, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, and Crisis Research Network, the situation of Libya has been analysed to determine whether it is a failed state or otherwise. Mired in an unenviable situation, the interests and leaning of various regional and extra regional adding fuel to the fire has also been elaborated. The paper culminates by recommending a way forward as a recipe for bringing Libya from the brink of disaster.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Political Landscape, Militias, Armed Groups, Terrorism, Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), Failed State, Strategic Vision, Grand Bargain.

Introduction

Post Qaddafi, Libya is in a complete mayhem with infighting multi-polar conflicting political structure, militias fighting across the entire landscape of Libya, the capital Tripoli at the mercy of these warring militias, terrorists finding safer havens in the vast lawless land and the writ of the internationally recognized government of National Accord limited to the limits of the Naval base in which is located.

Geo-Strategic and Geo-Economic Significance of Libya

The geo-strategic importance of Libya stems from its location and possession of huge hydrocarbon reserves. It is located in the North Africa, at the cross junction of Mediterranean, African and Arab Worlds, with 1800 kilometers coast line just miles away from Italy, Libya is the ideal launching pad for power projection into MENA and beyond. The fact that post-independence, the British, French and US payment for military basing rights was the main stay of Libyan economy before the discovery of black gold elucidates the geo-strategic importance of Libya. The proximity to the turbulent African Saharan region adds to its significance.

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Standing at 47.1 billion barrels, Libya has the largest oil reserves in Africa, of which 85% is exported to Europe¹. Libyan crude considered to be of high quality with low refining cost, most of Italian refineries are structured to refine the Libyan sweet crude, restricting of refineries to take Saudi heavy crude is a no go option. Libyan gas reserves as per Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED) 2010/2011 is estimated to be 52.7 trillion cubic feet with large swath of land still remaining unexplored.

Arab Spring – Regional Milieu

Originating from Tunisia in 2010², the Arab Spring quickly engulfed the other states of the region including Egypt and Libya³. Whereas the mass uprising resulted into peaceful regime change in Tunisia and Egypt, the 40 years repressive regime change was written with blood of the Libyans at a mass scale, culminating at the brutal murder of Qaddafi on 20 October 2010⁴.

The four decades of Qaddafi rule, singularly focused on extending his rule, was characterized by intentional erosion of institutional development and capacity. The resultant absence of political system, state institutions, economic associations or defence forces to run the post Qaddafi resulted into mayhem, leading to a wrecked and failed Libyan state.⁵

Post Regime Change

The demise of Qaddafi left the Libyans and international players in a quandary regarding the future of Libya with some accusing the major power players of deliberately creating a mess of Libya. The implosion of Qaddafi regime left a vacuum which the new institutions were unable to fill. The void in the state institutions was resultantly filled by armed non-state actors, particularly those Islamists groups which had been haunted during Qaddafi regime. The loss of state monopoly over violence led to creation of violent armed groups leading to an armed struggle, resulting into institutional partition of the country⁶.

The General National Congress (GNC) elected through the first elections on 7 July 2012 replaced the National Transitional Council (TNC), a conglomeration of anti Qaddafi forces which had been formed during the uprising to act as the “political face of the revolution⁷”. GNC was mandated to form a constituent assembly which would form a constitution through referendum. GNC voted to form a new ‘House of Representatives’ (HoR) on 30 March 2014. However, GNC rejected the results and instead re-convened in the

Eastern city of Tobruk. The HoR and new GNC signed a political agreement on 17 December 2015 to form a Presidential Council consisting of 9 members and a 17 members Government of National Accord (GNA). The HoR would continue to function as the legislative arm of the state and a 9 members GNC nominated 'State Council' would act as advisory body. The Libyan Political Accord (LPA), signed in December 15 in the Moroccan city of Skhirat envisioned holding of new elections within 2 years of the formation of GNA⁸.

Taking Stock of the Situation

Ever since the ouster of Muammar Qaddafi, the various stake holder of Libya's political and military factions are engaged in an ongoing politico-military struggle for control of political patronage networks and for influence over Libya's post-revolution future. The power struggle has led to civil war in the country.

Political Landscape

Libyan politics is based on local politics and tribal allegiances. Since 2014, there are effectively three power centres in Libya, namely; the Presidential Council (PC), the House of Representative (HoR), and General National Congress (GNC).

The Presidential Council (PC), headed by Fayaza al-Sarraj since 30 March 2016. Borne out of Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), the PC oversee the Tripoli based Government of National Accord (GNA), which is required to be endorsed by HoR, which has moved to Tobruk and has yet to endorse the GNA. PM Khalifa Ghwell heads the rival entity 'Government of National Salvation', which rests on the authority of 'General National Congress' (GNC), also called Tripoli Parliament⁹. The bulk of these members are anchored in the 'State Council' which acts as advisory body to GNA/ PC. GNC made an attempt in October 2016 to oust the GNA through a coup d'état¹⁰. The Third power centre, anchored in the Eastern Part of Libya i.e. Tobruk and Al-Bayda consists of HoR in Tobruk and the government of Abdullah al-Thinni based in al-Bayada are effectively under the control of Khalifa Haftar, the Commander of Libyan National Army (LNA) which is based in Marj¹¹.

Military

The Libyan Armed Forces were completely paralyzed and decimated in 2011 uprising through the US led UN approved sustained international aerial

campaign¹². Destroying the bulk of hardware¹³, the troops either abandoned their barracks or captured in the campaign. The efforts of internationally recognized GNA to raise the Libyan Armed Forces are yet to see the light of the day. Khalifa Haftar on the other hand commands the Libyan National Army with his base in Marj, Eastern Libya. Haftar recently went to Russia for a shopping spree to add to his stockpile of ordinance. LNA possess guns, tanks and aircraft to conduct its battle and control most of the Eastern Libya barring a few pockets held by Jihadist elements.

Militias/ Armed Groups

Libya is littered with all sorts of armed groups ranging from fully equipped armies to locally operating militias throughout the length and breadth of its land. Militia groups that operate in and around Tripoli are considered as those who support the government of GNA. The most important militia supporting the Unity government is the Salafist leaning Special Deterrent Force (RADA) numbering 1,500 which is based in Maitiga Complex (containing the airport area). Haitham Tajouri, protect his gains through the one of the largest militia in Tripoli. Islamist learning militias having their roots in the defunct "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)" are considered opposing the GNA. Misratan militias are considered to be the most powerful militias and by and large support the GNA. Misratan militias as part of 'Libya Dawn' were primarily responsible for evicting Zintanian militias from Tripoli in 2014 and are now credited with re-taking of Sirte from ISIS. They are thus considered as the most potent militia on Libyan landscape. Having lost key strategic locations in Tripoli and surrounding, Zintan militias are re-grouping in their abode for any future encounter.¹⁴

Terrorism – Libyan Context

Post revolution, Libya's rapid transition to democracy, given the absence of governance and democratic institutions coupled with nationwide mass armament, the country descended into 'war for territory' that was manifested in different forms; political and intra-organizations power struggles, as well as physical violence for territorial control¹⁵. Amidst the chaos, as a result of the 'war for territory' the circumstances were ripe for the emergence and spread of extremists and terrorist groups, which eventually led to the outbreak of the 'war on terrorism' phase.

Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) – Counter Terrorism Efforts

The LPA¹⁶ provides the tool to address the challenges of fighting terrorism by expressing the determination of all parties to confront all forms of terrorism in all its forms, manifestation and funding sources, regardless of its motives with the responsibility of counter terrorism resting with the state (Governing Principle 17 & Article 36)¹⁷. Article 24 of LPA stipulate that State Council would be competent to examine and propose necessary policy recommendations on combating terrorism, extremism, violence and exclusion. Article 35 of LPA stipulates GNA to combat terrorist organizations including ISIS – Ansar Al Sharia and Al Qaeda with international support. Article 58 posits that an international conference to build state's capacity in combating terrorism would be organized by GNA in cooperation with the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

Jihadist/ IS Groups in Libya

Libya is home to a range of jihadist groups, from the Islamic State group (ISIS) to al Qaeda-linked groups, to other Salafi-jihadi factions. Some are wholly indigenous and rooted in particular locales while others – particularly ISIS affiliates – have many foreigners at both leadership and rank and file level. Libya's jihadist network can be divided along generational lines; the first generation belongs to those jihadists who fought against defunct USSR in 1980s and who established now defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in opposition to Qaddafi regime. Several former LIFG figures, including its final leader, Abdelhakim Belhadj, played key roles in the 2011 uprising and went on to participate in the country's democratic transition, forming political parties, running in elections and serving as deputy ministers in government.

- **ISIS in Libya;** ISIS is the most active group responsible for at least 42 percent of terrorist incidents and 69 percent of deaths. Established by the Third Generation Jihadist in Derna in 2014, Libya has been divided into three Wilyats (provinces); Barqa, Tarablus and Fezzan, led by a Saudi named Abd al-Qadir al-Najdi as its leader.¹⁸ The total number of ISIS fighters remains ambiguous with Pentagon reporting their strength around 6,000 (Toaldo and Fitzgerald 2016). Post Sirte, these

ISIS cadre is reported to have moved to other parts of Libya, specially, towards West¹⁹.

- **Ansar al-Sharia in Libya;** With the leadership anchored in the Second Generation of Jihadist and cadre drawn from Second Generation, formed in 2012 by former revolutionary fighters calling for the immediate imposition of sharia law, Ansar al-Sharia's first branch was set up in Benghazi, followed by Derna, Sirte and Ajdabiya. The UN has put Ansar al-Sharia on its al-Qaeda sanctions list in 2014.²⁰
- **AQIM/ Al-Mourabitoun;** Led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, these groups have their foot prints in Libya, in the south and central/eastern regions, largely through Libyans who once worked with them elsewhere, particularly in Algeria, before returning home after Gaddafi was ousted²¹.
- **BRSC;** In response to Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity, Ansar al-Sharia's Benghazi unit merged with other militias to form the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC) in summer 2014.²²

Libyan Economy

Once considered as one of the strongest African economy, the protracted standoff, institutional collapse and lower international oil prices have decimated the mainly oil based Libyan economy. Prior to the 2011 revolution, Libya had one of the highest balance surpluses in the world. Post revolution, Libyan economy observed an upward trend in economic growth owing to an enhanced oil production. Since 2013, Libyan economy has shrunk dived by 22% with a forecast of further shrink by 5.2%, inflation has risen from 2.6% to 11 % in 2016²³. With this pace of economic nose dive, World Bank has cautioned that Libya is on the brink of economic collapse²⁴. With complete dependence on oil as the mainstay of the Libyan economy, and 1.6 million Libyan on public payroll, the Libya reserves depleted to 56 billion US dollars in 2015 from 108 billion US dollars in 2013. With the current expenditure of US dollars 20 per annum, this surplus is expected to further slash to US dollars 43 by the end of 2016.²⁵

International Carousal

The international community remains starkly divided over the peaceful resolution of Libyan imbroglio. Broadly speaking, US, UK, Italy, Turkey, Qatar and immediate neighbour Algeria support the GNA in the west, whereas Russia,

France, Eastern neighbor Egypt and UAE have thrown their weight behind the Tobruk based government in the East²⁶.

Regional Milieu

Post Arab Spring, initiated from the North Africa, whereas Tunisia and Egypt have recovered from the shock of the Arab Spring, Libya remains in turmoil. On the South of Libya is located the Sahel region, which is suffering from food crisis, economic meltdown, terrorism, insecurity and political instability. The ongoing anarchy in Libya resulting into porous border has thus provided the most feasible escape route to the migrants to the European shore.²⁷

Extra Regional Players

- **US and EU;** Having far reaching interests in Libya, many western countries (including US and EU) have their overt and covert foot prints in Libya both in military as well as diplomatic domain. Their geo-strategic and geo-political interest range from the proximity of huge sweet and cheap oil to Europe to countering terrorism and stopping the refugees' flux of refugees reaching the European shores. Besides, the huge contract for reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure and rebuilding of Libyan Defence Forces also offer a golden opportunity to these technology developed nations. The famous axiom of Rothschild merits mentioning over here "The time to buy is when there's blood in the streets²⁸".
- **France;** Having actively participated in the 2011 Qaddafi removal through sustained air operation and presently militarily active in the neighboring Sahel region, France has strategic interests in the stability of Libya. The porous borders of Libya provide safe haven to ISIS and AQIM for to and from movement between Sahel and Libya, thus posing a threat to French interests in that region²⁹. Financial interests and migrants issues occupy central stage in French interest in Libya. As a part of 'Operation Barkhane', French troops based in Madama, Northern Niger are reported to be operating in areas along Libyan Southern borders³⁰.
- **Italy;** The closest geographical proximity and being the former colonial ruler of Libya, Italy's stakes in Libya are the highest as compared to other regional and extra regional forces. Dependent on Sweet Libyan Oil for its refineries, Italy is the first stop for illegal migrants sailing out of

Libya. Though a close ally, Italy was at the forefront of military intervention to topple Qadaffi regime in 2011 and still maintains its presence in Libya, though in a benign form³¹.

- **Russia;** In an effort to ingress deeper in North Africa, Russia has established cooperation with Khalifa Haftar, the Commander of LNA whose recent visit to Moscow was an effort in the same direction. Reportedly, Haftar has earmarked 4 billion LYD for military deals with Russia³². The Iranian-Russian victory in Aleppo and other cities in Syria would further embolden Russia to exert herself more vigorously in MENA region in the coming days.

Regional Players

- **Egypt;** Egypt has the most at stake in Libya by virtue of its long shared border and the love-hate relationship that these two Arab countries have been having since long. Egypt has the most to gain from a pro-Egyptian government in Libya, hence it's sustained and determined support to Tobruk based politico-military alliance in Libya. Containment of Islamists and ISIS cadre in Libya, eradicating political Islam and a pro-Egyptian Eastern region of Libya 'Cyrenaica' in the shape of Haftar creates a solid buffer zone for Egypt. While maintaining close ties to Haftar, Egypt at the same time is also supporting the UN-led political process³³.
- **UAE;** Though ostensibly supporting the UN peace process, French-Emirati air base has been reported in the Eastern City of al- Marj, the headquarters of Khalifa Haftar.³⁴ Emirati ordinance has also been reported to be in use of Haftar's forces.
- **Turkey;** once a dominant power in the region, Turkey has huge financial interests in Libya, hence working hard to bring stability to the war torn country. Though not having any physical presence, Turkey is reportedly been supplying weapons to Tripoli based Islamist Libyan Dawn forces.
- **Qatar & Saudi Arabia;** Qatar is reportedly supporting a former jihadist Abdelhakim Behlhadj, whereas with its hands full in Yemen and Syria, Saudi Arabia, ostensibly does not have any appetite for partaking in Libyan imbroglio.

UNSMIL

UNSMIL spearheading and supporting the political reconciliation process in Libya, was forced to evacuate from Tripoli in July 2014. The intense efforts of UNSMIL managed to bring the opposing side on the table in December 2015 in the Moroccan city of Sikharat, culminating into signing of Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) which resulted into formation of Government of National Accord. Whereas UNSMIL continues to support the political process from Tunis, majority of political and military players opposes the LPA, hence undermine the efforts of UNSMIL.

Contextual Analysis

Libya – The Notion of a Failed State?

The failed state or "State deconstructed" is characterized by the absence of any formal structure which could guarantee order and justice. "State without government" is always the result of uncontrolled violence situations that prevent the constituted authorities to run correctly. The Crisis States Research Network, an organ of London School of Economics has defined failed states, Crisis State as well as Fragile State. According to this definition, a Crisis state is where "reigning institutions face serious contestation and are potentially unable to manage conflict and shocks".³⁵ Failed state on the other hand has been defined as a state that no longer perform its basic security, development functions and that has no effective control over its territory and borders. A failed state is one that can no longer reproduce the conditions for its own existence.

The extremely fragile political process centered on multiple power centres, dividing country into two halves, omnipotent security threats marked by violence and turf war between a plethora of militias, the relentless terrorist activities throughout the length and breadth of Libya, free passage way for illegal immigrants, the failure of the state to provide protection as well as basic services to its citizens makes Libya a strong candidate for being labeled as a failed state. The socio-political structure fragmented beyond the expectation of international community, failure of the government to assert the writ of the state, severe liquidity crisis, fuel shortage, healthcare deficient and AGs/ militias calling the shots on the streets of Libya accentuate the assertion of Libya being a failed state. Based on the extremely fragile state of affairs, Commander US Africa Command, General Rodriguez testified before the US Senate Armed Services Committee in

March 2016. Secretary of State Johan Kerry however, stopped short of declaring Libya as a failed state, declaring it as close to being a failed state³⁶.

Way Forward

The Libyan kaleidoscope is mired with a multitude of challenges including; dependence on a plethora of militias having nexus with political factions to provide basic security, the looming threat of ISIS, multipolar political power centers, and divergent interests of regional and extra regional players. The Libyan imbroglio thus presents extremely complex challenges to national and international community with no single or short term solution in sight. Failure, on the other hand is also no option as failure of Libya would lead to uncontrollable consequences. Any enduring solution to Libyan mayhem would be a long and painful process and would be long lasting unless and until it has buy-in from all stake holders including regional and extra regional players.

Strategic Vision and Strategic Oversight; It is felt that piecemeal and fragmented efforts to resolve Libyan crisis would prove to be counterproductive. The present arrangement of being in a reactive mode, responding to evolving situation in a reactive mode has to be replaced by a well thought out fully integrated plan with keeping contingencies ready as the situation evolves on the ground. The strategic vision to keep the Libyan on correct path would also require to be supplemented by strategic oversight by UNSMIL.

Coordinating International Engagement; Rather than putting their weight behind one faction, the regional and international power brokers would also have to take the aspirations of all the stake holders. The existing arrangement of regional and extra regional players pursuing their own agendas and promoting their own interest is proving detrimental to the overall peace process and has resulted into deep fissures in the Libyan society. There is therefore a need for creation of uniformity of opinion amongst all the players on returning normalcy to Libya. An effort at the level of Security Council (SC), followed by an International conference under the auspices of UNSMIL may pay due dividends in due course of time.

Political Buy-in-Grand Bargain; Any enduring solution to Libyan crisis must have political buy-in from all stakeholders, the existing polarity must come to an end, the mighty ones of Libya would have to bury their egos and self interest in the dunes of Sahara Desert, if they want their country to be on set

path, a prosperous nation where their youth can realize their dreams. This would require a 'Grand Bargain' and huge compromises by all the stakeholders. The stakeholders have to realize that with all its blemishes, LPA is the only workable solution for peaceful resolution of Libyan Crisis. Rather than initiating the whole process from the scratch, the constitution drafting of Libya would have to be based on LPA, there is no looking back, all stake holders have to look forward for crisis resolution.

Establishing the Writ of the State; The establishment of the writ of the state is the edifice on which the peace of Libya would be restored. For establishing the writ of state and its monopoly over violence, the AGs and militias controlling the streets of various cities and town would have to be re-integrated into society through a specially created Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) plans, tailored to unique and challenging environment of Libya.

UNSMIL; To gain wider acceptance and greater credibility, UNSMIL would have to return to Libya sooner than later. A Tripoli based UNSMIL would gain wider access and restore the confidence of Libyans in the viability of their state. Their return would also be a harbinger for the other international organizations and countries to return to Libyan polity.

Combination of Approaches-Look Forward Not Backward (Local Governance/ Municipalities); While continuing to restore peace to Libya through the political dialogue and international support, there is also a need for resorting to a bottom up approach by investing in local governance and making these institutions as focal point to resolve the dispute at local level and then projecting the trajectory upwards. The effective engagement of youth at local level would kill their appetite for taking part in the conflict at national level.

Gender Based Approach for Peace Making; The universally acknowledged fact that women have more to gain from peace and more to lose in conflict, making women as the focal point for initiating peace process would pay rich dividends in a complex Libyan environment.

Arms Embargo: The arms embargo imposed through UNSC resolution 1970 of 2011 has proved to be a bonanza for black arms market. Whereas the AGs and militias are procuring their ordnance easily from black market, acquisition of weapons and ammunition by government through the exemption process is an

extremely cumbersome process, when viewed in the background of the fact that most of the government departments are dysfunctional. The government has to be facilitated for raising their combat potential for establishing the writ of the state.

Soft Power: Soft power could be another instrument through which the Libyan could be culturally catalyzed for having the need for having enduring peace in Libya³⁷.

Conclusion

The politico-military brass of Libya must realize that their self-centered key-hole vision interests are the core of the whole quagmire that they have created and the international actors are exacerbating these fissures by lending support to one side or the other. They have missed a great opportunity of making Libya a democratic, modern and viable country. Libya must be brought back by them from the brink of disaster. Libyans have to decide themselves whether they want Libya to become another Somalia or they are willing to make hard choices to steer Libya out of trouble and set it altogether on a new course. Reaching consensus on power sharing mechanism through politico-economic compromises is the only way forward to decisively reverse the negative trajectory that Libya is undergoing and put it on a path of prosperity and unity.

NOTES

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